

MUSIC REVIEW

The experimenting is far from over

Monday Evening Concerts series, once marked for extinction, makes a glorious return.

By MARK SWED
Times Staff Writer

It's official. Los Angeles is a new-music capital.

This didn't happen overnight. For more than three-quarters of a century, the city has hosted the Monday Evening Concerts, the nation's series devoted to the new and offbeat. Monday night, MEC was gloriously reborn at REDCAT, after being dismissed last season from long-term Los Angeles County Museum of Art sponsorship.

The momentum for interest in today's music, along with the grass-roots community support for it, is lately growing exponentially. But the sellout crowd Monday night — along with exceptional music and music making — will, I think, be remembered as a critical-mass moment. Despite tickets priced at \$50 (the program was a benefit), people seeking returns began queuing up two hours early.

The MEC lifeline was twice cut in the last year and a half. Its director for 34 years, composer Dorrance Stalvey, died just as LACMA decided to end the series, evidently displeased that it did not target the date-night audience the museum hopes to draw with its advertisement campaigns. LACMA could not, however, kill an ideal.



JAMIE RECTOR For The Times

SOLO: Cristina Zavalloni made use of body and voice.

A musically blue-chip committee (with Pierre Boulez's name on top) exists to save MEC. The series has found a young new director, Justin Urcis, with ideas and enterprise. Although itinerant this season (the remaining three programs will be in Zipper Auditorium), the future Monday looked bright.

The program nodded its head to tradition while remaining up-to-date. It began with Luciano Berio's "Circles," high avant-garde theater for soprano, two percussionists and harp, with a text from e.e. cummings. The score's first MEC performance was in 1962, two years after it was written for Cathy Berberian, Berio's wife and a singer who forged the way for new vocal techniques and dramatic approaches to the

use of both body and voice.

Cristina Zavalloni was the soloist at REDCAT. Her extraordinary performance took that fusing of body and voice to a new level. With leonine grace, the Italian soprano — who made a dazzling local debut in the Philharmonic's Minimalism Jukebox festival last spring — wrapped her gestures and vocalizing around every word of text, making every utterance corporeal.

Zavalloni followed that with an encore of Berberian's "Stripody," a hilarious romp through fast-cut comic book exclamations. This was not singing but the detonation of song. One of a kind, Zavalloni has as yet little presence in America. What are we waiting for?

Stalvey's "Stream," written in 2002, was given its Los Angeles premiere. The performers were a Ukrainian violinist (Taras Krysa) and pianist (Virko Baley), both based at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Expectations may not have been high. Stalvey's music, though often taking its inspiration from jazz, tended toward bland, old-school abstract Modernism.

But Krysa, and especially Baley, a well-known composer in his own right, gave "Stream" drama and swing. Ferocious piano outbursts were gripping. Stalvey was a self-effacing man who could appear in later years beaten down by LACMA indifference. But his voice as a composer grew in intensity.

"Stream" proved a powerful statement, and Monday seemed to serve as a symbol of an MEC

fist raised in protest.

Benefit or no benefit, the program made no compromises. Gerard Grisey's "Vortex Temporum" was given its local premiere after intermission. Finished in 1996, two years before the French composer's death, it is an enthralling 45-minute study on an arpeggio figure found in Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe." Think of it — creaking, cracking, squeaking, swirling, squawking — as Daphnis on LSD.

Written for small chamber ensemble, "Vortex Temporum" does everything French academic composers like to do to show off their mind-bending use of computers to figure out how time may be stretched like taffy and how weird overtones may be produced.

Ravel's nice arpeggio is slowed down and speeded up beyond recognition, smashed and sent through the sound barrier. Violin and viola are placed on players' laps and scraped. A clarinet alternates between one normally tuned and one a quarter tone off.

But under his formidable surface, Grisey was sensualist and softy, and "Vortex Temporum" is as much deliciously sweet and smooth egg-cream music as it is egghead. The performance by excellent local players expertly conducted by Donald Crockett was at all points convincing. And Vicki Ray's account of a central piano cadenza of immense difficulty and glittery physicality was a show in its own right.